

National Fostering Agency

The National Fostering Agency Limited
920 Birchwood Boulevard, Warrington WA3 7QS
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is one of the English branches of the National Fostering Agency (NFA), which also operates in Scotland and Wales. This registered office is based in Warrington and covers the North West region. It provides a range of fostering placements, including parent and child, emergency, short and long-term.

Inspection dates: 26 to 30 June 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	Good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	Good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	Outstanding
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: This is the agency's first inspection.

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children make measurable progress from their starting points due to the placement stability, warm, nurturing care and the exceptional leadership of the agency.
- Children are enabled to live alongside their brothers and sisters. When they cannot, they are supported to keep in touch with their family in a planned and safe way.
- Children have a strong voice. The agency adopts creative ways to capture the children's views and wishes and involves them in meaningful decision-making.
- The agency is aspirational and wholly supports children to achieve to the best of their ability. All achievements are recognised and celebrated and this helps the children to grow in confidence and thrive.
- Children's safety is promoted well. The agency ensures that all staff and carers are suitably equipped with the knowledge and skill to recognise risk and minimise harm.
- Partnership working with all stakeholders is a key strength of the agency. Professionals spoke positively about the registered manager, staff and carers.
- The registered manager is a strong, supportive and fair leader. She has high aspirations for the children and the service. Her unwavering commitment to the children is admirable.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The areas for development are in relation to recording of information. In particular, the children's guide does not detail how children can contact their independent reviewing officer. Some panel minutes lack clarity. Safeguarding records could be more robust.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members, and that they record the reasons for its recommendation. (NMS 14.7)
- Ensure that the children's guide includes details of how the child can contact their independent reviewing officer and how to secure access to an independent advocate. (NMS 16.4)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The agency provides foster families for 230 children. One of its key successes is keeping brothers and sisters together; as a result, 148 children are living with their siblings.

The agency provides a range of different types of placement, which include short-term, long-term, parent and child and bridging placements. Furthermore, many young people remain living with their foster families, on a 'staying put' arrangement, beyond 18 years of age. This ensures that children's specific needs are entirely considered and provided for throughout their journey.

Children benefit from living in a stable family home where their individual needs are understood by their carers. Unplanned moves and placement breakdowns are rare. This is down to successful matching procedures, which involve the agency ensuring that it has sufficient information from the placing authority to inform their placement decisions. Where possible, children are introduced to their carers and visit the carer's home before moving in. Additionally, the agency provides the local authority with carer profiles that include photographs of the foster family, pets, and the home, to share with children prior to them moving in. This is particularly helpful to children when placements are made in an emergency.

Foster carers are well supported by the agency, including regular supervision, ongoing training, peer support and foster carer mentoring schemes. Some examples of foster carers' training include safer caring, child protection and safeguarding, child sexual exploitation, radicalisation, attachment, and understanding behaviour. As a result, carers feel fully equipped and confident to undertake their caring roles and responsibilities. This is demonstrated in the foster carers' comments: 'NFA have their fingers on the pulse, we get excellent support 24 hours a day', 'my supervising social worker is brilliant and the training is fantastic' and 'they go above and beyond what I expected and go out of their way. They are there 24 hours a day and are always there.'

Foster carers and children value the family support service that the agency provides. This support is helping children to develop new skills, improve their confidence and keep themselves safe. For example, one young person has benefited greatly from the individual sessions undertaken with a family support worker, covering important issues such as sexual health, child sexual exploitation, as well as being supported to take up horse riding.

The agency is aspirational and almost all of the children are attending school or other educational provision. Children who have been out of school for some time are helped to re-engage with their learning. Foster carers have ambitions for the children and work closely with schools, colleges and other providers to ensure that the children meet their full potential. Children have ambitions also. One child proudly said that she plans to be a doctor. Some children have progressed to university.

Children's holistic health needs are promoted effectively. They benefit from having regular physical health checks and healthy lifestyles. Their emotional health improves with nurturing care and, when necessary, therapeutic support. The agency commissions a bank of therapists who provide a monthly consultation surgery and specific training to carers. The therapists also provide direct counselling to children when required. Carers spoke highly of the support and training that they receive from these therapists.

The agency promotes active and 'fun' lifestyles for children. Children have been involved in producing a cookery book with renowned chefs throughout the country. Not only was this an exciting and unique experience for the children, but it helped them to learn about nutrition and diet, in a fun way, whilst developing essential life skills. Children benefit from a wide variety of activities and hobbies that support their social and emotional development and engagement in community life.

The voice of the child is wholly promoted in this agency. Fostered and birth children are meaningfully engaged in the running of the service. All children have the opportunity to attend consultation groups where their views and opinions are sought in an age-appropriate way. The children's ideas are actioned; for example, they asked for an older children's group and this happened. Without a doubt, children's views, wishes, needs and safety are the agency's priority. Children are currently redesigning the children's guides. This will include details of how children can contact their independent reviewing officer, which is required under the national minimum standards.

Foster carers understand how important it is for children to sustain relationships with significant people to support their understanding of their background and family. Children are, therefore, supported to stay in touch with their parents, families and friends in a safe and planned way.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

All staff and foster carers receive ongoing training on safeguarding and protecting children. Consequently, agency staff and foster carers know, understand and follow the correct safeguarding procedures. Additionally, some children have received training on e-safety, road safety and first aid. Children's safety is paramount in this agency.

Support workers play a key role in helping children to understand risk and learn how to keep themselves safe. In particular, this includes teaching young people about appropriate relationships to minimise the risk of sexual exploitation. Some children benefit from direct support from specialist professionals, such as missing from care workers. All of this is helping children to recognise their vulnerabilities and avoid danger. Children recognise and are pleased with their achievements. This is reflected in the comments from a child, 'I have done really well. I haven't gone missing, I am back in education and I haven't hit my social worker.'

Children going missing from home is not a major concern for this agency. Very few children go missing; however, when they do, the agency manages it appropriately. Foster carers report all incidents to agency staff, police and the child's social worker, which ensures collaborative working between all relevant bodies. The agency plays a key role in multi-agency strategy meetings to address concerns that are more serious.

However, missing from home reports do not always provide sufficient detail and this weakens individual risk assessments. For example, some reports lacked details of the time one child was last seen and their presentation and demeanour on their return. Additionally, the monitoring of independent return interviews is not consistent across the team. Likewise, some children's risk assessments and safer caring plans lacked detail and did not provide a complete picture of the presenting or potential risks. Clearly, these shortfalls rest primarily in the recording of information and are not indicative of poor safeguarding practice.

Foster carers, panel members and agency staff are recruited safely. The agency panel members and the agency decision maker demonstrate robust practice when determining foster carer approval. On occasion, minutes from the panel have lacked clarity regarding how some decisions were made, in particular when carers have been presented at other panels in the organisation. Again, this a recording issue and had no direct impact on the children's safety.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The agency is part of a large national organisation. This is the agency's first Ofsted inspection since receiving registration in its own right in July 2016. Prior to this, it had been operating under a different registration since 2007.

The registered manager joined this service in 2015. She has managed this service for over two years. She brought to the service a wealth of social work experience, including management in other fostering and children's residential services. She is a qualified social worker and she holds the relevant management qualification required for her role.

The registered manager is highly aspirational and she leads her team by example. Children are at the centre of her practice and their measurable progress, in all aspects of their lives, is testament to this.

Children's needs are the manager's priority. She has an in-depth understanding of every child's needs and progress, despite the size of the agency. This is achieved through her highly effective monitoring systems and regular consultations with her team.

The manager is constantly developing new ways to promote and measure children's progress. What's more, she has pioneered ideas throughout the organisation, for example, a professional training programme for all agency support workers. A team

manager and supervising social worker has devised an outcomes tracker, which the company intend to develop nationally. A health and well-being survey with children and young people is being developed in the region. This will help the team to assess children's starting points, ascertain children's own views of their well-being, and monitor their individual progress. The agency has started to use this information to inform children's looked after reviews and care plans. Consequently, children are meaningfully engaged in the making and reviewing of their care plans and gain greater insight of their progress and achievements.

Children's achievements are constantly celebrated. The agency recently held a children's award ceremony, where several children received recognition and rewards for their progress and success. One young person was extremely pleased with her certificate and award for her creative writing. Others received awards for improvement in their behaviour and for keeping themselves safe.

All staff consulted felt extremely well supported and enjoyed working for the agency. This is because they receive regular professional supervision where they reflect on their practice and receive effective guidance and support. The agency values all of its staff and, as a result, staff respect each other and work well as a team. An office apprentice spoke highly of the support and opportunities provided to him since joining the agency. He valued the robust induction process and the ongoing training on a variety of subjects, such as equality and diversity and skills to foster training. He felt that this helped to improve his confidence and provided him with a solid foundation to build his work experience on.

Staff have benefited from being led by an ambitious and inspirational manager. She recognises that each member of staff has their own unique learning styles. She worked closely with each member of staff and the human resources officer to complete a skills matrix. This helped staff to identify and evaluate their knowledge, skills and any areas of development. This is reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that the team is highly skilled and knowledgeable to support foster carers effectively. This high standard of support is mirrored in the excellent care and guidance provided to carers and, thus, children.

The manager takes robust action to address all issues of concern, including complaints from children, allegations against foster carers and poor staff performance. Furthermore, she has developed strong relationships with placing authorities and has managed to maintain these positive relationships, despite, at times, having to challenge some authorities' poor practice and decision-making. The registered manager has children's rights and needs at the centre of her practice. She is a strong advocate for all of the children involved in the agency.

When necessary, the agency shares information, in a timely way, with other relevant professionals to ensure that correct investigations are swiftly undertaken. Safeguarding professionals confirmed that the agency makes prompt referrals and that internal investigations are 'very balanced and proportionate'. All professionals consulted with reported good communication from the agency.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: 1234377

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